

Coalminers strike against Pittston Company in Virginia, 1989-1990



A short history of the successful 10 month long strike at Pittston Coal against cuts to retirement and health benefits, which included mass sit-ins and sabotage.

In 1987, in order to cut costs, the Pittston Company chose to negotiate directly with the United Mine Workers Union (UMWA) at its own coal mines instead of with the Bituminous Coal Operators (BCOA) group which had previously regulated employees' health and retirement packages. However, in 1988, the Pittston Company ceased contributing to a benefit trust it had established in 1950 for miners who had retired before 1974. This decision left between 1,500 and 1,700 retirees, widows, and disabled miners without healthcare. The company also doubled its healthcare deductibles and began to keep mines running around the clock without giving its employees overtime pay. Finally, it eliminated the successorship clauses in its employees' contracts, the implication of which was that if a mine were sold off or leased, the workers would have no way of being sure they would keep their jobs. These efforts to cut costs – especially those related to healthcare – enraged union workers, many of whom had suffered serious injuries and health problems due to the hazardous working conditions in the mines.

On April 5, 1989, after the miners had worked without a contract for 14 months, Richard Trumka, the president of the UMWA, declared that the union was going on strike until a new contract was signed which restored the cut healthcare coverage. Over 2,000 mineworkers (mostly in Virginia but some also in Kentucky and West Virginia) walked out of the mines and began picketing. The Pittston Company brought in replacement workers almost immediately, so the strikers centered their tactics on slowing production and keeping the coal from being delivered to its destination once it was mined. In order to do this, picketers sat down in the road as the trucks bearing coal came toward them. At times multiple hundreds of protestors would be jailed in a day, thus blocking the coal delivery trucks from using the roads for hours at a time.

The tactics of the UMWA were explicitly nonviolent, yet a few of the union members and the supporters who came from all over the country did not share the union's strategy. This resulted in mostly non-union-affiliated picketers (also referred to as wildcat strikers) throwing rocks at coal delivery trucks, popping tires, breaking truck windows, and more such acts that damaged opponents' property. The non-UMWA presence among the protesters was enormous: by the height of the protest in June of 1989, there were 2,000 UMWA union miners on strike along with 37,000 - 40,000 wildcat strikers. This meant that at certain points there were nearly twenty times as many non-union participants as there were union participants in the struggle.

Along with sending monetary support, these wildcat strikers came from all over the country to protest. Their presence did much to bring attention to the strike, as did visits from Jesse Jackson, Cesar Chavez, and many well-known musicians and performers. The Daughters of Mother Jones fed and gave lodging to these visitors and wildcat strikers in a campground nearby, which strikers dubbed Camp Solidarity.

Women played a very important role in the campaign: Camp Solidarity was run by the Freedom Fighters, a group of women who took it upon themselves to feed and provide for the strikers. Another important women's group was the Daughters of Mother Jones, who not only helped to feed and house strikers but also took part in the strike themselves: twice every week they would picket outside the Pittston headquarters in Lebanon, Virginia, and on April 18, 1989 a group of 39 members held a sit-down strike at the company headquarters which lasted 36 hours in total and shut down all coal production for a day and a half. Neither the Freedom Fighters nor the Daughters of Mother Jones were officially affiliated with the UMWA, yet their support was critical to the union's eventual success in bringing about an agreement.

The decisive action of the campaign took place on Sunday September 17 at Moss 3, the central processing plant for the Pittston Company. Ninety-nine union members were selected to conduct a surprise sit-down strike in the plant. They successfully ceased production for all four days that they stayed on the site, and thousands gathered outside in support of the sit-down. On September 20 all union members left, apparently tipped off to the fact that that State Troopers would arrive an hour later to force them to disperse or arrest them.

The Moss 3 action brought even further national attention to the campaign and the next month Elizabeth Dole, the United States Secretary of Labor, visited the strike site and appointed former Labor Secretary William Usery, Jr., to serve as a mediator. Three months later, on January 1, 1990, a settlement between the Pittston Company and the UMWA union was announced and was put into effect on February 20. The union won a new contract that included the reinstatement of health and retirement benefits to miners. Another major victory for coal miners followed two years after the strike had ended, but is widely attributed to the events at the Pittston mines: the Coal Act of 1992 stated that all coal mines must provide their workers with health and retirement benefits, and extended benefits from unionized companies to union workers whose employers were no longer in business.

Although the campaign ended in success for the miners, it was a mixed success at best. The UMWA had poured many of its resources into the campaign, and at the end of the strike was fined \$64 million, including \$200,000 for the Moss 3 action. Many of these fines were eventually dropped and replaced by 10,000 hours of community service. The Pittston Company suffered financially under the new agreement, and eventually sold many of its coal plants to a non-union company.

Despite the mixed success of the strike in the long run, it is still regarded as one of the most successful struggles of the last few decades of the 20th century, especially because it resulted in the creation of the Coal Act.

Sources

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